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THE GREAT GODDESS BAZAAR. Based on a collection of monologues, *Women of Choice*, by David Rush. Directed by Jane Page. Performed and co-created by Tamara Meneghini. Goddess Here Productions, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. 13 April 2012.

Richard Schnechner's rasaboxes, inspired by the Natyasastra, is an actor training exercise featuring a grid of *rasas*, or flavors, which correlate to nine emotional and energetic spaces: grief, fear, humor, love, wonder, rage, disgust, courage, and bliss. An actor steps into a box and explores a rasa through voice, body, and breath. At the heart of this exercise lurks a sublime blend of past and present; from an ancient Sanskrit performance text, a training technique for modern actors was born.

Tamara Meneghini experimented with rasaboxes to develop the female characters in *The Great Goddess Bazaar*, a solo performance of nine monologues. Each character resonated with mythic undertones, yet was recognizably current. Just as the rasaboxes exercise blends ancient and contemporary practice, *The Great Goddess Bazaar* melded ancient and contemporary characters, transporting myth into the present day. This mash-up of ancient rituals and yoga mats, of invocations and cell phones, of archetypes and types you know from the supermarket, united mythical and contemporary characters in a series of monologues from women who were connected by their choices.

The Great Goddess Bazaar was first produced in 2010 at the Nebraska Repertory Theatre. In its early stages, masks differentiated the characters, but were later dropped in favor of a more realistic approach. The production also appeared at the Boulder Fringe Festival, Square Product Theatre (Boulder), the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and the

Millibo Art Theatre (Colorado Springs). I recently attended the University of Nebraska's showing, and considering that the piece received its first public performance at the Nebraska Repertory Theatre, the return to Lincoln smacked of a homecoming--an apt metaphor for a play about women, choices, and moving forward.

The staging was simple, fitting the play's fringe origins, with a wicker trunk functioning as the primary set piece. Scarves, shoes, a yoga mat, and a laundry hamper littered the stage. At each character shift, seamlessly accomplished with sound and light cues, Meneghini, in a plain blue shirt and black pants, pulled a new pair of shoes from the clutter around her. Each shoe-switch spurred a character's transformation: blue glittery heels for the aging cabaret singer, black cotton flats for the little girl, water shoes for the drowning swimmer, and so on. This technique was not new, but its simplicity served the storytelling.

The performance began with Ariadne, an overworked professor, who burst onto the stage, towel-drying her hair with one hand, scribbling in an appointment book with the other, with a cell phone balanced against her ear. This modern wonder-woman had undertaken the Sisyphean task of scheduling a get-together with a friend, only to discover her planner crammed with luncheons, committee meetings, and deadlines. Ariadne reappeared between each monologue, furiously trying to squeeze a block of time out of a packed schedule, while multi-tasking with various exercises. Her story was interspersed throughout the play, carved up, chopped into pieces, like the bite-sized chunks of time in her planner.

Each woman who appeared after Ariadne was at a crossroads--looking forward, looking back, or looking around. Plunged into the depths of a particular *rasa*, every

woman faced a choice. Doris, the aging star (humor), explained her decision to improve the world. Mary, the demure Southern widow (grief), confessed to a priest that she allowed her husband's suicide. Barbara, the swimmer (fear), fought underwater to stay alive. Bess, the child (wonder), chose to believe in her dead mother's eventual return. Aphrodite, the street lady (disgust), reflected on past relationships, and convinced herself that life on the street was preferable. Michelle, the soldier (rage), lectured military women about the dangers of rape, and shared her secret solution with them. Rosalind, the repeater (love), comforted a friend with stories of past lives. Kathryn, the patient (bliss), asked her daughter to end her life.

Though each monologue stood alone, faint patterns emerged between them, suggesting a network of connectivity. As the swimmer, Meneghini hauntingly portrayed a drowning woman, arms thrashing, eyes frantic and fearful; in a later monologue, the patient confessed that she never learned to swim. Soldier figures appeared throughout: the widow's husband was a war veteran; Michelle was a soldier; the fortune-teller claimed she was in Henry V's army. The theme of belief also coursed through the monologues: the swimmer recited a Hail Mary while drowning and forced herself to believe; the widow asked the priest how many Hail Marys were required to atone for her sin; the child steadfastly believed her father. Though stand-alone pieces, the monologues circled back to previous ideas or heralded the way for future themes.

In Ariadne's final appearance, after foraging in her calendar for a free block of time, she found two unscheduled hours on April 31. Then another call came in, and Ariadne's cycle began again. Of course, Ariadne's free time was on a date that did not exist, suggesting the fictitiousness of time. *The Great Goddess Bazaar* was a flurry of

time; in this world steeped in history, a stressed-out professor did yoga while speaking of the Ching dynasty, a fortune teller revealed her past lives, a drowning woman recited a litany of familiar verses. These women were immersed in the past, present and future as they made their choices.

The Great Goddess Bazaar, and the rasaboxes from which it developed, is rooted in choice. You choose to step into something--a box, a character, an emotion. The power is in the choice, and then you surrender. Whether the choice seems consequential or not--whether it is an ancient choice or a new one, we are connected by our readiness to commit to these choices. This production, with its swirling array of women's voices, reminded me of lines spoken by Hamlet--another character who is both mythic and contemporary, and who struggles to make a choice: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all."

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